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SEEN & UNSEEN SPACES

EDITED BY
MATTHEW DALTON, GEORGIE PETERS
& ANA TAVARES



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Life after death: Shrouded burials in later Anglo-Saxon England

Siân Mui

Department of Archaeology
Durham University
sean.mui@durham.ac.uk

On his deathbed, the eighth-century Mercian saint Guthlac leaves instructions for his own funerary preparation to a brother named Beccel:

"After my soul departs from this body, you shall go then to [Pega] my sister... and bid her set my body in the coffin, and wind it in the sheet which Ecgburh sent me... when the body and the soul part, this body shall be wound in the garment, and laid in the coffin" (Felix, *Life of St Guthlac*, Goodwin 1848: 84).

After Guthlac's death, Pega buries him as instructed. Twelve months later, she reopens Guthlac's tomb, where his body is found to be uncorrupted as if he is asleep. The linen garments are "of the same newness as when they were first put around the body" (Goodwin 1848: 90). Praising Christ, Pega wraps the body in a new shroud and reburies Guthlac "in a memorable and honourable place" (Goodwin 1848: 92).

Guthlac's story illustrates that the Early Medieval shroud was not simply a piece of cloth wrapped around a corpse. From the deathbed to the grave, the saint's shroud projects a performative space for the representation of death, which communicates complex cultural ideas about the body and the soul, death and life after death, gift exchange, gender and kinship. The pristine shroud is incorporated into the visibility of Guthlac's undefiled corpse in the tomb, providing a perceptual reference point for the miracle. Thus, whilst veiling the dead body, the shroud also constructs around it a visual locale in which the body is disclosed. This interplay of visibility and invisibility is heavily implicated in the construction of the narrative and, tellingly, in the understanding of death, the body, spirituality and sainthood in early Christian England.

While the recurrence of shrouds in Old English literature, exemplified by the *Life of Guthlac*, promises avenues for the exploration of shrouding as a later Anglo-Saxon

funerary practice, archaeological efforts in the study of shrouds remain limited. Shrouds are too often methodologically denied as grave goods, perpetuating an unhelpful dichotomy between the earlier, furnished, 'pagan' burials and the later, unfurnished, 'Christian' ones. As a result, archaeologists have largely glossed over the significance of the practice upon which Guthlac's story sheds light. Thus, bringing together excavated evidence and documentary sources, the present paper addresses these much-overlooked shrouds in the archaeological record. It examines the ways in which shrouded bodies were constructed, displayed and conceptualized, from the deathbed to the grave and beyond, but by no means provides an exhaustive account of later Anglo-Saxon shrouds. It seeks, however, to offer a glimpse of the complex stories of shrouds waiting to be unravelled.

Complicating Anglo-Saxon shrouds

Early Anglo-Saxon inhumations were often richly adorned with dress items, but grave furnishing came to a decline towards the end of the sixth century, which coincided with the onset of Christianization in England. By the end of the seventh century, unfurnished burials in the extended supine position and orientated with the head to the west became the norm (see Bayliss *et al.* 2013). This general lack of dress accessories in graves from the eighth century onwards has sometimes been straightforwardly interpreted as being suggestive of the adoption of shrouds (Hinton 2005: 87). Thus, shrouding is often positioned as the Christian counterpart to the earlier funerary costumes: a negation of 'pagan' clothed burial, rather than as a practice in and of itself (Thompson 2004: 107–8).

Interrogation of the archaeological record nevertheless reveals some complications to this interpretation. Excavated evidence for the use of shrouds before the Norman

Conquest has been identified in a number of late Anglo-Saxon burial sites. Due to soil conditions in Britain, textiles rarely survive except when preserved by mineralization on metal objects. A remarkable exception is the shroud recovered from a pre-Conquest burial at Quernmore, Lancaster, Lancashire, which was preserved in an acidic, waterlogged peaty soil (Glover 1990). In most cases, the use of shrouds is suggested by skeletal positions. Wrapping a corpse in a shroud limits the movement of bones as the cadaver decomposes, and thus affects the position of the excavated skeleton (Duday 2009: 40, 45). As Boddington (1996: 13) asserts, skeletons recovered in compact positions, where arms were placed tightly against the torso and legs fully extended, are suggestive of body binding or wrapping prior to burial. Pins are occasionally found in graves and some might have been associated with shrouding, although there could be other means to fasten a shroud which simply do not survive archaeologically.

Excavated evidence suggests that shrouds were widely used in later Anglo-Saxon England, but the practice varied from site to site. Focusing on the region between the rivers Tees and Tyne in northern England, the use of shrouds has been identified at Jarrow, Monkwearmouth, Newcastle, Seaham and Bishopsmill School. Both Jarrow and Monkwearmouth were monastic sites (Cramp 2005). Newcastle and Seaham might have been associated with churches, although the postulated tenth-century church at Newcastle post-dated the pins from two interments by one or two centuries (Johnson 2007; Nolan 2010: 246). The cemetery at Bishopsmill School has no known ecclesiastical association, but was located adjacent to the earlier, pre-Christian burial ground of Norton. Hence, these cemeteries would have been used by different communities, all of which appear to have practised shrouding to lesser or greater extents, but with slightly different executions. Both Newcastle and Monkwearmouth produced pins and evidence for wooden or stone lining. On the other hand, no shroud pins or coffin traces were found at Bishopsmill School, but the two possibly shrouded burials (out of a total of 85) were identified on the basis of their compact positions. Likewise, at Jarrow only one grave out of 132 attributable to the Anglo-Saxon period was recorded with a 'tight' burial position suggestive of shroud use (Cramp 2005: 173, 180). These variations warn against the simplistic view of shrouds as a meaning-free antonym of 'pagan' funerary costumes. Instead, they were loaded with complex sets of values that were implicated in early Christian funerary grammar, as mourners made conscious decisions about the manner in which dead bodies were treated, represented and buried. The rest of this paper attempts to unfold these sets of values by exploring the construction of funerary perception through shrouding and the cultural implications of this practice.

Performative viewing

The rare example of a well-preserved shroud from the late Anglo-Saxon burial at Quernmore offers a glimpse of the actual cloth that wrapped the corpse, which is almost invariably lost in the archaeological record. The rectangular shroud, plain-woven from coarse wool yarn, was contained in a wooden coffin, which has been radiocarbon dated to between AD 525 and 745 (Glover 1990: 49–50). In addition to the cloth fibres of the shroud fabric, the peaty soil also allowed the preservation of locks of dark hair and finger and toe nails. The locations of creases, hair and nails suggest that the shroud was placed diagonally in the coffin, folded to encase a supine body with hands resting on the abdomen (fig. 1). A triangle was cut off one corner to wrap the feet, as the shroud was of an insufficient length to cover them (Glover 1990: 50). This suggests that the shroud had not been tailor-made for the individual, and that a haphazard solution was improvised. No additional binding cloths or pin were found, so the shroud might have been secured by means of stitching.

Juxtaposing this evidence with depictions of shrouded figures from manuscript illustrations, it appears that the Quernmore shroud represents only one of the many ways in which later Anglo-Saxon bodies could have been wrapped. The image of the risen Lazarus from the sixth-century St Augustine Gospels shows Lazarus wrapped in a winding sheet and bound with crisscrossed strips (fig. 2a). His face is exposed, but the shroud covers the top of his head. In contrast, on folio 12r of the mid-eleventh-century Old English Hexateuch, Methuselah's body is tightly wound by bands of cloth, revealing his head including his hair and beard (fig. 2b). This form is very similar to that of the shrouded Edward on the Bayeux

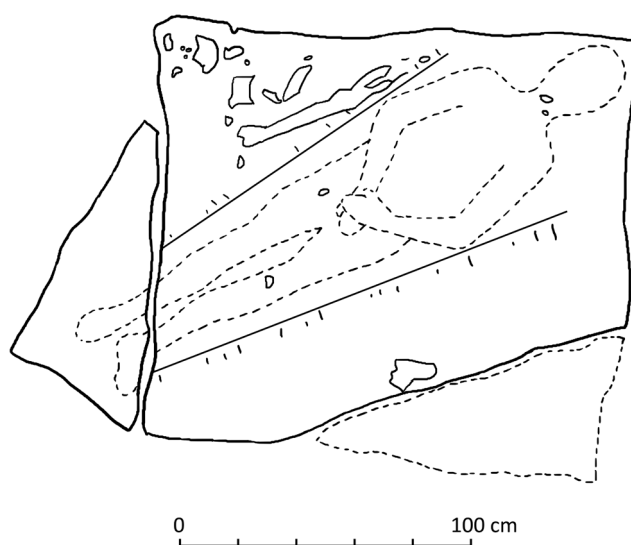


Figure 1. The Quernmore shroud (redrawn by Siân Mui after Glover 1990: 49, fig. 2b).

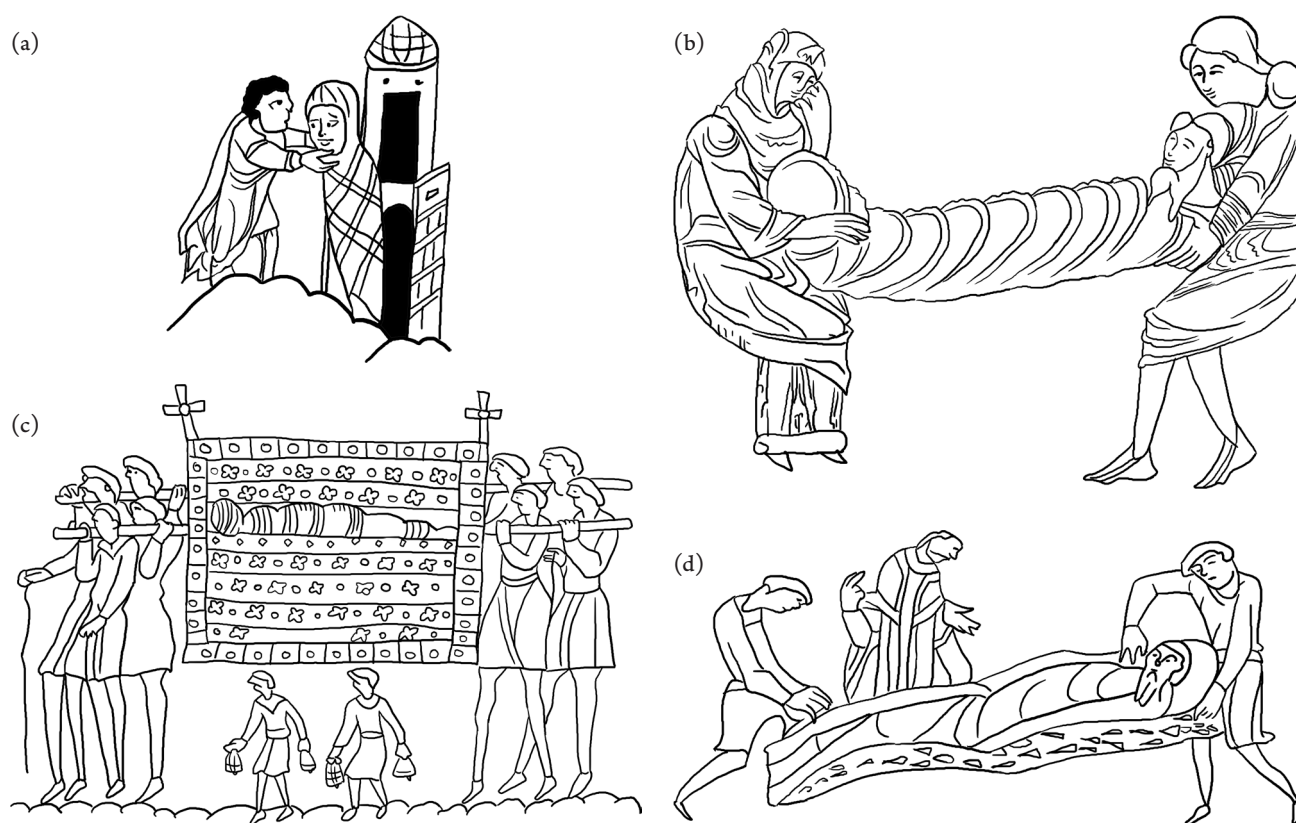


Figure 2. (a) The raising of Lazarus. Detail (redrawn by Siân Mui from the St Augustine Gospels, folio 125r, MS 286, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge). (b) Methuselah's shrouded body attended by a woman and a man (redrawn by Siân Mui from top panel, Cotton MS Claudius B IV, folio 12r, British Library, London). (c) Procession of the shrouded body of Edward, carried on a bier. Detail (redrawn by Siân Mui from the Bayeux Tapestry). (d) Edward on his deathbed. Detail (redrawn by Siân Mui from the Bayeux Tapestry).



Figure 3. The burial of Guthlac, showing Pega, Beccel, and two other monks placing Guthlac's shrouded body in his coffin (redrawn by Siân Mui from Harley Roll Y.6, Roundel 16, British Library, London).

Tapestry (fig. 2d), although in the adjacent depiction of the subsequent funerary procession, Edward's head is completely covered (fig. 2c). Methuselah's lack of face-cov-

ering may possibly imply that his shrouding process is not finished, and a face cloth is to be applied at a later stage, as in Edward's case. This may be supported by Roundel 16 of the late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century Harley Roll Y.6, which shows Guthlac's shrouded body, attended by Pega, Beccel and two other monks (fig. 3). The scene depicted here probably represents the last stages of the funeral, as they are about to place the body in the coffin. Guthlac's entire body including his face is concealed, with only an annotation on his torso indicating his identity.

It has previously been suggested that the use of face cloths, in the context of later Medieval Britain, was "a deliberate attempt to depersonalize the features of the deceased, perhaps in an act of humility" (Gilchrist and Sloane 2005: 107). The centrality of the head in encapsulating personhood may be envisaged in Hiberno-Saxon representations of Christ and saints, where "the heads are abnormally large and the bodies abstractly conveyed" (Cramp 2008: 6). As such, face coverings would have masked personal identities by rendering the face unseen, materially imposing a separation between the deceased and the mourners. This argument of de-individualization of corpses was in line with a general standardization in burial practices that emerged in the later Anglo-Saxon period, in terms of the adoption of the extended supine burial position and the west-east orientation.

Burial number	Age	Sex	Body deposition	Left arm	Right arm	Remarks
69/06	14–15	Male	Prone	Hand across pelvis, underneath body	Hand across pelvis, underneath body	Coffin?
66/55	40–60	Male	Right side	Bent across pelvis	Bent across pelvis	Stones by legs and arms
67/20	30s	Male	Supine	Bent across pelvis	Extended beside body	Coffin. Pin?
64/14	10–12	Unsexed	Right side	Clasped	Clasped	
64/17	12	Unsexed	Left side	Slightly flexed, hand at pelvis	Slightly flexed, hand at pelvis	
66/58	18 months	Unsexed	Right side	Unknown	Unknown	Pin

Table 1. Shrouded burials identified at Monkwearmouth.

Nevertheless, a closer look at the excavated evidence reveals that shroud use was far from uniform. At Monkwearmouth, six possible or probable shrouded burials attributable to the pre-Conquest cemetery (out of a total of 167 inhumations, 3.6 percent) have been identified, based on their compact burial position and the presence of pins in two graves. Although they were all buried with extended legs, there is a notable degree of variation in terms of body deposition: three were deposited right-sided, one supine, one prone and one left-sided. Both right-sided and supine depositions were common at Monkwearmouth (respectively 68 per cent and 27 per cent of 117 pre-Conquest burials with known deposition), but prone or left-sided burials were very rare: there were only four other prone burials from the site (4.3 per cent), and one other left-sided burial (1.7 per cent) (Mui 2013: 28–30). Two graves were associated with coffin traces, two with pins, and one with stones.

Furthermore, shroud use was possibly associated with the arm position wherein both arms were bent (table 1). At the Monkwearmouth, the overall most common arm position was that with the left arm bent and placed across the waist, and the right arm extended alongside the body (44 per cent of skeletons with known positions for both arms), whereas skeletons with two bent arms were less common (26 per cent) (Mui 2013: 27–29). The decision to use shrouds, therefore, might have influenced the placement of arms, possibly for practical reasons. It is also possible that the use of shrouds overrode any symbolic significance that arm positions might have carried by rendering the arms unseen. This evidence suggests that, at the level of the individual, the decision was not simply to shroud or not to shroud. Although these burials have not been closely enough dated to assess chronological change, it is clear that the practice of shrouding was intertwined with other aspects of the treatment of the body.

Price (2010) conceptualizes the complexity and individuality of graves as ‘materialized narratives’, which emphasizes the performative manipulation of objects and bodies in personalized funerals, constructing and communicating individual stories. This highlights a very important aspect of funerary rituals in which shrouding was incorporated: its performativity. Christian funerary rituals in Early Medieval western Europe were multi-staged and multi-sited events,

and as is evident in the literary record involving stripping the body, washing it, wrapping it in a shroud, transporting it, saying a mass and so on. It was recorded that, for example, Charlemagne’s body “was washed and cared for in the usual manner and, with the greatest grief of all the people, was carried to the church and buried” (Einhard, *Life of Charlemagne* §31, Pertz *et al.* 1991: 35). The individuality of each burial, therefore, was not only manifested by the physical grave itself, but also by the performance through which the representation of the body was mediated.

In his work on the social history of death, Ariès (1983: 168–172) argues that shrouds, coffins and catafalques¹ were meticulously deployed in the progressive concealment of death in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This process, for Ariès, would have created and reinforced an ideology where the dead were rendered unseen and separated from the living. The articulation of this separation by funerary performances has been illustrated in a recent study of Byzantine shrouding practice: through complex processes of displaying, stripping, washing, anointing, wrapping and finally burying the body in a grave, Moore (2013) argues that the sequence of mortuary practices would have gradually distanced the deceased from the living sphere, as they were slowly transformed from recognized individuals into anonymous corpses.

In Ælfric’s account of the requickening of Fursey, the saint’s body lay on the floor where he died and was attended from evening until dawn by “*licmen*”² (*On the Greater Litany. Tuesday*, Thorpe 1846: 334). The eleventh-century Laud miscellaneous 482 manuscript describes similar attendants at the deathbed. It is instructed that, upon death, the deceased is to be undressed and laid out eastward on a sack-cloth, and the eyes are to be covered and the mouth fastened (Fehr 1921: 65). These are undertaken by “*ðe þær ætstandað*” (‘those who are standing there’), implying a group of people watching over the dying person and treating his body after he has died. These instructions suggest that the undressing, covering (and possibly wrapping) of the corpse took place at the deathbed. As Laud 428 also describes the asperging of the house of the

1 A catafalque is a raised structure which supports the coffin during a funeral.

2 Old English, literally ‘body-men’ or ‘corpse-men’.

sick and dying person (Thompson 2004: 77), the deathbed appears to be in the home of the deceased.

It is possible that the attendants at the deathbed were also those who shrouded the body, although the story of Guthlac and his sister suggests that it might be undertaken by the family of the deceased. This process would have been lengthy and intimate, requiring physical engagement between the material clothes and shroud, the naked body of the deceased and the people who prepared it for burial. Had this process indeed taken place at the private sphere of the bedside at the home, access to the ritual would be restricted to a selected few, such as the priest, deacon, family and close friends. The surroundings of the house would be incorporated into the experience of the ritual, constructing a sensuous, solemn and spiritual space charged with an aura of death. The undertakers would touch the body to undress it, wash it, wrap it, secure it (by stitching or pinning), lace it and put the face cloth in place. The steady and gradual removal of the body from view formed a particular funerary spectacle, in which the shroud occupied a central position. If the shroud was implicated in the de-individualization of the corpses, the process would have necessarily been mediated through a slow, visually-intense performance.

Thus, as a performative act, shrouding not only conceals the dead, but plays an active role in structuring the very process of concealment. The deathbed represented a key space where the dead body was constructed and communicated, colouring the experience of the home henceforth. The depiction of Edward's funerary procession on the Bayeux Tapestry shows his shrouded body on a bier, implying that shrouding took place before the body was carried elsewhere for burial. The physical transportation of the corpse from the deathbed to the grave formed another commemorative performance, by which the body of the deceased was removed from the house of the living and relocated to the resting ground of the dead. The successive masking of the dead person would have been further intensified if the body was subsequently placed in a container: lifting the shrouded body, placing it in the coffin and closing the coffin lid. The Quernmore burial, for example, was contained in a boat-shaped, lidded wooden coffin (Glover 1990: 49). At Monkwearmouth, two of the six identified possible or probable shrouded burials contained evidence for wooden coffins, and an additional one was associated with stones by the legs and the arms. Evidence for shrouding and coffin or stones in the same grave is also present at Newcastle and Bishopsmill School, suggesting the use of a combination of techniques of mourning and commemoration.

The affective quality of this spectacle might be enhanced by the accompanying ritual, which can be visualized by returning to the depiction of Guthlac's funeral in the Harley Roll Y.6 (fig. 3). In the background is the interior of a church, where Pega and the monk on the left carefully lower the shrouded body into the coffin, while the monk at the central position holds a bell and swings a thurible, sug-

gesting a ritual being performed. The coffin would then be transported to the burial place and lowered into the grave, followed by the backfilling of the grave, gradually concealing the coffin from view and eventually sealing it off from the living. Some graves might be subsequently endowed with a new material presence in the form of wooden crosses or stone mortuary sculptures, rendering the graveside a commemorative space through the construction of a visual field of a different nature. These differing levels of visibility and invisibility gave room for a form of burial display which was not limited to impressive tableaux of jewellery and weapons. Instead, the interplay of seeing and not-seeing became a spectacle itself, potent in mediating the mourners' experience of funerary events and commemorative spaces.

Shrouds, sin and penance

By performatively manipulating visual perceptions during funerary processes, the deployment of shrouds incorporated a complex material language about death and the dead body, heavily imbued with cultural meanings and values. In the miracle account of Guthlac's incorrupt body, introduced at the beginning of this paper, saintliness manifests itself visually through the physical appearance of the body and the shroud. It is evident in the literary record that the shroud could become a secondary relic, contributing to saintly cults (Wickham-Crowley 2008: 305–306). Incorruptibility was folded in the Christian notions of fornication and continence, as Ælfric explains in a sermon:

"As cattle rot in their dung, so carnal men end their days in the stench of their wantonness. But if we spiritually offer myrrh to God, our mortal bodies are preserved from the stench of wantonness through continence" (*The Epiphany of the Lord*, Thorpe 1844: 118).

Hence, Guthlac's pristine shroud does not only mediate visibility, but it does so with an underlying discourse of sin and abstinence.

In his homily on the raising of Lazarus, Ælfric explicitly associates Lazarus' shroud with sin (Thompson 2004: 59). In contrast to Guthlac's story, however, the focus here is not on the preservation of the shroud, but the imagery of unfastening the shroud, which becomes a metaphor for the release from sins. Crucially, Ælfric links it with confession and penitence:

"Christ raised the stinking Lazarus from death, and when he was quickened, he said to his disciples, 'Unloose his bonds, so that he may go.' ... Every sinful man who hides his sins lies dead in the grave; but if he confesses his sins through compunction, he goes from the grave, just as Lazarus did, when Christ commanded him to rise: then the teacher shall free him from eternal torment, just as the apostles physically unbound Lazarus" (*The First Sunday after Easter*, Thorpe 1844: 234).

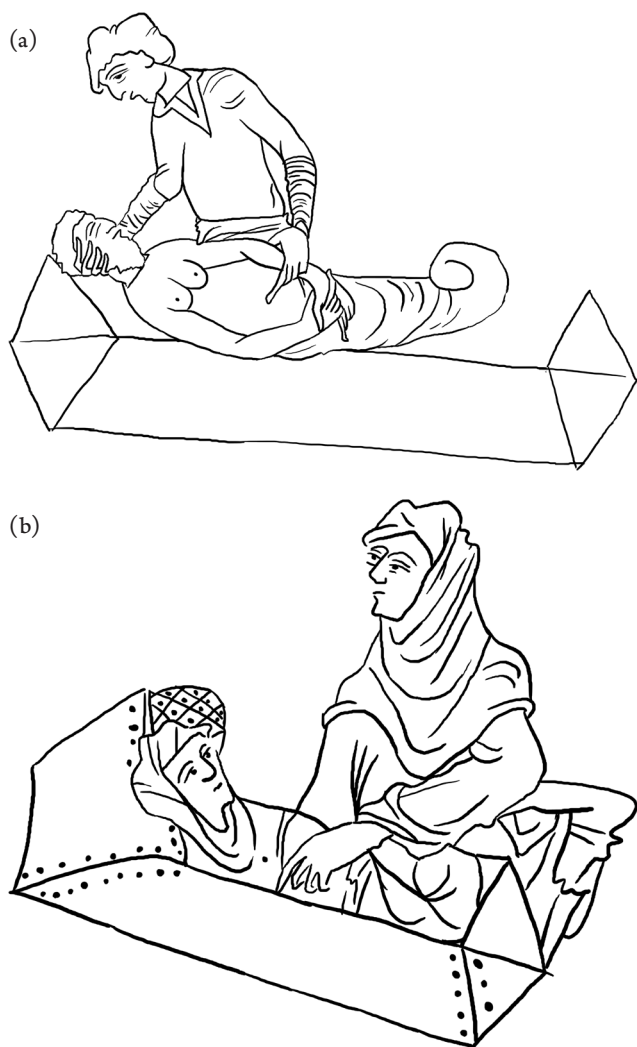


Figure 4. (a) The burial of Malaleel (redrawn by Siân Mui from Folio 59, MS Junius 11, The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford). (b) Irad's wife and the child Maviael (redrawn by Siân Mui from Folio 53, MS Junius 11, The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford).

Observing this symbolism of shrouds, Jane Hawkes (2003: 355–358) argues that the depiction of Lazarus' resurrection on three eighth- and ninth-century stone sculpture embodies an iconographic narrative emphasizing the confession of sins and Christ's redemption.

In another homily, Ælfric considers the shroud as carnal and improper, and the grave becomes a site of penance: "It is usual that the dead man is wound in cloth, but the cloth will not rise the more swiftly with the man, because he has no need of that unseemly cloth, but the spiritual garment which God provides for him" (*Sermon for the Laity, for Recitation on the Octave of Pentecost*, Pope 1967: 433–434). The sight of shrouded bodies in funerary rituals, therefore, might have acted as a focal sign of sin, powerful in envisaging the resurrection of the body and encouraging onlookers to confess and repent. The notion of the grave as a penitential environment anticipates a life after death in heaven, folded in paradigms of salvation and damnation. The graveside,

with the aid of mortuary monuments, would have offered a contemplative space for mourners or passers-by to reflect upon the transience of life and confess one's sins.

The link between the shroud and discourses of penitence becomes even clearer, when one considers the parallels between funerary and baptismal rites based on the Epistle to the Romans VI.3–5 in the New Testament. Throughout the Medieval period, the shrouded corpse was frequently compared with the swaddled child (Moore 2013: 209). In the depiction of the burial of Malaleel from the early eleventh-century Junius Manuscript, Malaleel's lower body was wrapped in a pale-coloured (presumably white) cloth, with the upper torso completely exposed (fig. 4a). The shroud's rear end is folded and curled up, which is very similar to the portrayal of swaddled children elsewhere in the Junius Manuscript, such as the child Maviael on folio 53 (fig. 4b). Moreover, the washing of corpses and dressing them in white garments might have echoed baptismal rituals (Samson 1999: 140). The Quernmore shroud has been stained brown due to its long-term deposition in peat, but it has been suggested that it would have originally been white (Glover 1990: 50). Both the baptism and the funeral would have embedded discourses of death and rebirth, physically as well as spiritually. Shrouds—particularly white shrouds—would have had significant penitential implications.

The parallels between the baptism and the funeral were not limited to shrouds. The late eighth- to early ninth-century stone cross-shaft from Elmstone Hardwicke, Gloucestershire, carries a rare motif with interlocking, opposed 'C-curved spiral' carving (Bryant 2012: 26–27). This motif is closely connected stylistically with the baptismal font from Deerhurst, located under four miles to the northwest (Hare 2010: 137). The stylistic similarity between the font and the cross memorial would have facilitated the interplay between notions of physical death and spiritual rebirth, as these objects reminded the audience of the vulnerability of the body, and of sin, confession and penance. The penitential significance extended beyond the deathbed and the grave, as the church and the mortuary monument took over as locales for contemplating the dead person's sin as well as one's own.

Conclusion

As everyday dress items and other objects became unsuitable for the commemoration of the dead in early post-Conversion England, a new repertoire of the material culture of burial emerged. While archaeologists have hitherto paid limited attention to the use of shrouds in the later Anglo-Saxon period, it has been shown that shrouds were not simply a negation of 'pagan' clothed burial, but they represented, more profoundly, an active uptake of Christian ideology. In the physical act of stripping and wrapping, shrouds played an active role in mediating visibility by simultaneously disclosing and concealing the dead body.

The process of shrouding was central to the manipulation of funerary spaces, constructing performative spectacles and inviting bodily engagements with death. Through a sequence of commemorative activities, the materiality of shrouds carried its visual rhetoric of sin and salvation from the deathbed to the grave, creating multiple mortuary spaces folded in complex paradigms of death and life after death. As Guthlac's shroud reminds us, the piece of cloth wrapped around a corpse was not just simply a piece of cloth wrapped around a corpse.

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